Favorite by bananannabeth

Series: You Can Talk To Me (aka. Karen Wheeler is a Good Mom™) [2]
Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: F/M, Karen is just trying her best, and Mike has a big mouth, and Steve is a fantastic babysitter
Language: English
Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Holly Wheeler, Jonathan Byers, Karen Wheeler, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler
Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler
Status: Completed
Published: 2017-12-05
Updated: 2017-12-05
Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:09:44
Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply
Chapters: 1
Words: 3,611
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

When Karen Wheeler runs into Steve Harrington at the supermarket and finds out that he's home alone, she does what any good mother would do and invites him to dinner with her family. It's definitely not awkward, because Nancy has gone out with Jonathan for the night, which makes things better, not worse. Right?

Mike doesn't think so.

Favorite

Author's Note:

> In this fic Karen knows about El and The Upside Down and everything that's happened, and is trying to make amends for not being there for her children during all of it.
>
> I recommend reading my other fic from this series You Found Me In The Rain before reading this one (although I will admit that this fic is way more headcanon-y and.. probably.. not as good.. as that one).

In the past, shopping had been Karen Wheeler's favorite thing to do.

Now, it was just another chore to be ticked off the list.

She was overwhelmed, trying to get a week's worth of groceries, plus some new clothes for Mike because he was outgrowing them faster than she could buy them, and the same for Holly, who wasn't much better, and Nancy had asked for a new eyeshadow palette, and Ted had requested a full roast for dinner, and Karen had been the one left to buy all of it, on her own.

Well, almost on her own. Holly was on her hip, crying because she didn't understand that the lipstick samplers weren't crayons with which she could draw on the floor.

“Holly, come on, baby, you’re all right, everything’s okay,” Karen said soothingly, bouncing her hip a little as she reached for Ted’s favorite cereal and threw it into the cart.

Holly just wailed louder in response, and Karen was honestly *this close* to giving in to that wine sale and getting herself a few bottles.

It had been a week since her discussion with Chief Hopper, El, Mike and Nancy. A week since she’d discovered exactly how much she’d missed out on over the last two years, exactly how much danger her children had been in, exactly how much she owed them - all of them - for everything they’d done.

It was a bit much, to be honest.

And so Karen had sworn off the wine that had accompanied her through the painful months where her family had drifted away, and had promised to be more present and alert and helpful than ever before.

Her children had promised the same.

Right up until the moment she’d asked them to come shopping with her. Then, all of a sudden Mike had this big project he had to work on for school, and Nancy had promised Jonathan she’d see a movie with him and she really couldn’t bail, that would have been so rude.

So Karen thought she might be entitled, really, to just one bottle of

wine.

She rubbed her forehead and tried again to calm Holly down, giving her the car keys in an attempt to distract her with something shiny. Holly quieted, shook them once, and then threw them forcefully down the aisle before resuming her crying.

“No, Holly!” Karen took a deep breath, feeling like crying herself. “Please don’t throw things.”

She started forward to collect the keys, but someone beat her to it.

“Hey, Mrs. Wheeler,” Steve Harrington said with a smile, swinging her car keys from his index finger. He was wearing jeans and a worn bomber jacket that was too big on his shoulders, like it had been passed down to him from someone broader and older.

“Steve,” she said, smiling back. “Hi.”

“These yours?” he asked, holding the keys out to her.

She took them and sighed. “Yes, thank you. Holly decided it’d be fun to throw them.”

“Aw, you practicing your pitching, huh?” Steve said, smiling at Holly and wiggling his fingers at her.

To Karen's immense relief, her daughter stopped crying and stared at him in silence. He went to pull his hand back and she grabbed for his fingers, giggling. He let her hold his hand, pulling on his fingers, and Karen felt like she could breathe for the first time this entire shopping trip.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem. I've been told I have a way with kids." Steve's tone was light, joking and casual, but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"How are you doing?" Karen asked, pushing her cart over to the side so they weren't blocking the whole aisle. "I haven't seen you in awhile."

"Yeah, uh." He rubbed the back of his neck, obviously uncomfortable with the implications of that. "I've been… you know, I've been busy. A few things popped up unexpectedly."

It had taken a little while for Karen to warm up to Steve. Before meeting him, she knew him as the boy who had encouraged her previously sweet and studious daughter to sneak out to a party and have sex with him, which is not the best of first impressions. But Nancy had insisted that he was a good guy, and when he'd come around to the Wheelers' he'd been nothing but charming. He'd won Karen over with his offers to help with the cooking and the dishes, and won Ted over with his talk of basketball and football and all the things that Mike had no interest in whatsoever.

And it had been clear that he was besotted with Nancy; he smiled whenever he looked at her, and had gone out of his way to help with anything she'd asked. He'd been a good boyfriend, and so when Steve had stopped coming round and Jonathan had started, Karen had been more than a little surprised.

She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she'd be crossing a boundary, but then decided that in this strange new world she apparently occupied, boundaries were more like guidelines anyway. "I heard that your parents are away again? Another big business trip?"

"Yeah, yeah, they've gone down to Florida for a bit."

"So you're home alone at the moment?"

"Well, sort of, it's actually -" Steve was interrupted by a shriek from the end of the aisle. He spun around, instantly on alert, but relaxed when he saw Dustin dropping some of the numerous packets of Nilla Wafers, 3 Musketeers and Eggos he was attempting to carry. "Dude, how many times do I have to tell you to get a basket?"

"You've got the basket, you were meant to meet me over there," Dustin countered, tucking a box under his chin as he bent down to collect one of the fallen ones. He didn't notice Karen until he'd straightened up, at which point he beamed and hurried forward so fast that he almost dropped all of his food again. "Mrs. Wheeler, hey! Fancy seeing you here!"

"Hello, Dustin," she said warmly.

Holly let go of Steve's hand and reached for the box of Eggos on top of Dustin's pile, snatching it and hugging it to her chest. "Eggos!" she exclaimed happily.

"Sorry," Karen apologised, not daring to take it off her for fear of another round of tears. "She's become quite fond of them lately. They're her new favorite food."

Dustin laughed as he tipped the rest of his stash into the basket Steve was holding. "Gee, I wonder why."

Karen's smile was sweet. "Mhmm, we should probably stock up on them, too."

There was a momentary silence, the three of them standing in the cereal aisle of Hawkins' supermarket, before Karen finally gathered her courage and said, "Steve, you know you're welcome over anytime. I don't know what's happening with you and Nancy -"

He winced.

"Sorry," she said quietly. "But really, I know… I know things haven't been the easiest lately, and I know how lonely it can be being home alone, so feel free to come over anytime, okay?"

Steve blinked at her, processing her words. He glanced down at

Dustin and then back to her, gesturing vaguely. “You - you know -?”

“Dude!” Dustin grabbed his elbow, tugging on it excitedly. “You’ve just been invited to dinner with Mrs. Wheeler, you don’t say no to that!”

Steve lightly hit his hand away. “Dustin, don’t be presumptuous, she’s not inviting me over right now -”

“Actually,” Karen interrupted, and both boys turned to her, Steve wary and Dustin excited. “I’m cooking a roast tonight, but Nancy isn’t home, so there’ll be more than enough, if you wanted to join?”

“Yes!” Dustin punched the air. “Mrs. Wheeler, we would be honored -”

“Shut up!” Steve shushed him, waving a hand in front of his face. “You weren’t even invited.”

Karen laughed. “Dustin’s always invited. With the amount of time those boys spend in my basement, I always just assume they’ll be staying for dinner.”

“See?” Dustin said, pulling a face at Steve, who rolled his eyes in response.

“Really, Mrs. Wheeler, that’s very kind of you, but -”

“ *Steve,* ” Dustin whined. “It’s a roast! A Karen Wheeler roast, you don’t understand -”

Steve did understand, as he’d been present for many Sunday roasts with the Wheeler family, but he didn’t mention it, and so Karen didn’t either.

He rolled his head back, groaning, and Karen was struck suddenly by the familiarity in the boys’ interactions. “You’re not going to shut up about this, are you?”

“As much as I love your cooking, I’m a little sick of pasta,” Dustin said.

Steve looked offended. “You said you loved my spaghetti! You had three servings!”

“I did love it! But it’s a *roast* , man. My favorite.” Dustin shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, *I can’t help it* .

“It’s no problem, really,” Karen insisted as Holly shook the Eggos in the box.

Steve looked down at Dustin and then back to Karen, and she saw the resignation in his expression. “Okay, I guess that’d be nice.” She wasn’t offended, but he hurriedly amended, “I mean, I’m sure it’ll be

lovely. If you're - uh, if you're sure that Nancy's not home…?"

Karen wisely decided specifics weren't required. "She's definitely out."

"Okay." Steve put his shoulders back and flipped his hair out of his eyes, transforming into the confident young man she'd met all those months ago. "Okay, we'll see you tonight, then, Mrs. Wheeler."

It was 6.15 and Karen was just starting the process of mashing the potatoes when there was a knock at the door.

"Mike, can you get that?" she called, searching through the fridge for the butter, which she'd just used, so why wasn't it at the front where she'd put it?

"Got it, Mom!" Mike called back, and there was the sound of two sets of feet running up from the basement to the front door.

Just as Karen found the butter, Mike opened the door, and she heard the confusion in his voice when he said, "Steve?"

"Hey, Mike," Steve said, sounding just as awkward. "Hi, El."

“Heya, Mike! El! Nice to see you on this most pleasant of evenings,” Dustin greeted.

There was the sound of the door closing, and then a very confused Mike. “Uh - What are you guys doing here?”

“Well, um, it’s sort of a funny story,” Steve began, but Dustin cut him off.

“Your mom invited us to dinner,” he said casually, voice getting louder as he neared the kitchen. He stuck his head in, curly hair flopping to the side as he tilted his head, and beamed at Karen as she mashed the potatoes. “Good evening Mrs. W! It smells delicious, I must say.”

“Mom!” Mike appeared beside him, El at his elbow. “Why are Dustin and *Steve* here for dinner?”

“I ran into them at the grocery store and Steve told me that his parents are away again, so I invited them over for some real food. Not just more pasta or Eggos,” Karen said innocently.

El looked offended. “No Eggos?”

Mike scrunched his face up. “But Nancy’s not here.”

“Duh,” Dustin muttered, and El looked at him, bewildered.

“I know, sweetheart,” Karen said, dropping the masher into the sink. “Which means there’ll be enough food for everyone. Can you three go and set the table, please?”

Mike looked set to argue, but both El and Dustin were already making their way over to the cutlery drawer.

Now that Karen knew El’s history, the girl was much more comfortable around her, and seemed very eager to make a good impression. Karen hadn’t thought it possible, but it seemed that Chief Hopper was raising her to be a very polite young lady.

Left with no choice, Mike grabbed the place mats and carried them out to the dining table, huffing the whole way.

Steve appeared in the kitchen as the kids filed out, glancing around. There was a family photo from two Christmases ago on the fridge, and Karen noticed how his eyes lingered on it. It had taken some coaxing, but Nancy had convinced him to join in. He’d been sitting right beside Nancy, their hands clasped on his knee, and the two of them had been beaming into the camera.

He must have felt Karen’s eyes on him, because he cleared his throat and looked away hurriedly. When he spoke his voice was tight, as though every word took great effort to get out. “Do you need help with anything?”

Karen felt a pang of sympathy. “No, thank you, Steve, I think we’re all good to go. You go settle in at the table and tell the kids to do the same, once they’ve finished setting it.”

“Sure thing.” With a mild nod of his head he was gone, and for a second Karen thought maybe she’d done the wrong thing in inviting him over tonight.

But then she heard him in the dining room, voice clear and bright. “Guys, that is not how you set a table. What, were you raised in a barn?”

“A lab,” El quipped, which earned a laugh from Dustin.

Steve just clicked his tongue. “Come on, forks go on the left…”

Ted didn’t seem to notice that it was an odd occurrence for Steve to be joining them for dinner. He happily chatted to him about sport, until Mike audibly groaned and Karen got the hint to change the topic. She thought she’d be safe asking about his new job as a police recruit, and she was rewarded by an enthusiastic response from El, who seemed to enjoy the topic greatly.

“Hopper says you’re one of the best, but he doesn’t want you to know,” she informed Steve as she stabbed a piece of roast.

“Why doesn’t he want him to know?” Dustin asked, brow furrowed.

“He says that your head is already big enough with your hair, he doesn’t want it getting any bigger.” Her tone was matter of fact, and Karen might have thought that she didn’t understand the implications of what she was saying, if not for the cheeky smile she was trying to hide behind her food.

Steve scoffed. “Oh, is that so? Well, you can tell your old man that I’ll take that as a compliment, and that he just wishes he had hair this good.”

El giggled, and Mike laughed, and Dustin took another piece of roast, and Karen decided that this had been a good idea after all.

Until they were eating dessert, that is, and the front door swung open to the sounds of Nancy and Jonathan laughing quietly.

Ted had long since retired to the Lay-Z-Boy, but everyone else was still at the table, and they all froze at the sound. Steve had a spoonful of pudding halfway between his bowl and his mouth, and it would have been comical if not for the terror in his eyes.

“Shit,” Dustin muttered, and Karen couldn’t even blame him.

“Mom, we’re ho - oh my god.” Nancy stopped in the entrance to the

dining room, eyes as wide as Steve's. " *Steve* ? What are you doing here?"

Jonathan appeared behind her, looking around the people at the table before ducking his head and looking stubbornly down at his feet.

When no one else spoke, Karen stepped in. "I invited Steve and Dustin over for dinner after I ran into them at the grocery store today."

"What? Mom, you can't just…" Nancy trailed off, shaking her head. She finally asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You've been out all afternoon."

Nancy paled. "Yeah, but…"

"Do you want some pudding?" Steve blurted out, holding out his bowl.

Nancy gaped at him.

The kids looked back and forth between them, the whole room silent, until Mike snorted out a laugh. That immediately set Holly and Dustin off, and soon El was laughing, too, and then even Karen couldn't bear it.

“You guys!” Nancy said, but her exasperation was somewhat ruined by the way her lips quirked up in a smile.

She grabbed Jonathan’s hand and led him over to the table, pushing him into the seat Ted had vacated and dragging a spare chair in from the kitchen. She parked it next to Steve and pulled his bowl over, snatching his spoon and stealing a mouthful of pudding.

Jonathan went to grab El’s, but she swiped it out of reach at the last second. “No Eggos,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “So I’m eating all the pudding.”

He laughed and held his hands up in surrender. “Fair enough.”

“There’s more in the kitchen, I’ll get it for you.” Karen started to stand.

But Nancy was up out of her seat first. “Don’t worry, Mom, Jonathan and I can get our own.”

“Uh, yeah.” Jonathan rose, slower than his girlfriend, and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

Nancy gave Steve a pointed look, eyebrows raised, and tilted her chin towards the kitchen. Karen supposed she thought she was being subtle.

“And -” Steve said, drawing the word out as he searched for an excuse, “I will get some more, too, because Nancy stole mine and that’s not fair.”

The three teenagers hurried back into the kitchen, leaving Karen with the kids.

“They’re so *weird* ,” Mike said, but his tone was more observational than mean.

“Says you, your girlfriend’s drinking her pudding.” Dustin pointed his spoon at El, who had her bowl raised to her lips and was, indeed, attempting to inhale the last few bits of her dessert.

“You’re the one who taught her that!” Mike exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air.

“I did not teach her that, I just helped her refine her technique -”

“Oh, it’s the same thing, and you know it.”

“Totally different.”

Karen leant back in her chair, trying to tune the younger kids out in order to hear what Nancy and the boys were saying. Not that she

wanted to eavesdrop; she just wanted to make sure they were okay. She'd known that it could have been awkward, inviting her daughter's ex-boyfriend over for family dinner, but she had really had nothing but the best of intentions.

"- serious, Steve?" Nancy was hissing, and for a moment Karen's heart dropped.

But then she heard Jonathan laughing lowly. "This is why you ditched us, so you could eat dinner with Nancy's mom?"

"No!" Steve hissed back. "I mean, it sorta worked out that way, but it wasn't the plan. I told you I couldn't go to the movies coz I had to babysit Dustin, and that's what I was doing when Mrs. Wh - *your mom* - invited us to dinner. I tried to say, no, really -"

"Steve, it's totally fine," Nancy said softly, and Karen exhaled. Maybe it hadn't been a disaster after all. "I just wasn't expecting it."

"Yeah, it was a bit weird to walk in on you having dessert with them," Jonathan murmured.

"After everything, you still think that counts as weird?" Steve argued.

"That's probably fair."

Karen craned her neck, turning her head just enough that she could

see them standing in the kitchen, just in time to glimpse Nancy leaning up and giving Steve a kiss on the cheek. “I’m glad you’re here, Steve.”

Karen quickly turned back around, wiping a bit of chocolate sauce from Holly’s chin and smiling to herself. When the teenagers settled back down at the table El was wiping her mouth and the boys were still squabbling, although the topic seemed to have changed now to who had the bigger vocabulary.

“God, do you two ever stop?” Steve asked as he took a bite of his re-filled dessert.

“Steve, who’s smarter, me or Mike?” Dustin asked with the urgency of a life or death matter.

“Mike or *I* ,” Nancy corrected.

“Mike,” El answered immediately, lifting her eyes from her bowl for the first time in minutes.

“I wasn’t asking you, you’re biased,” Dustin snapped, though his tone was gentler than he was with the other boys.

“Oh, like Steve’s not biased.” Mike rolled his eyes.

“Boys, boys, I don’t have favorites,” Steve said, flashing his most

charming smile.

“Nancy’s the only one who really doesn’t have a favorite,” Mike muttered, but immediately appeared to regret it.

He went bright red, almost blushing as much as Nancy, and Jonathan and Steve suddenly became very interested in their pudding. Dustin looked absolutely scandalised, looking between the three of them with his jaw dropped.

El just looked lost. “What’s -”

Mike quickly cut her off. “Nothing!” And then, in an embarrassed whisper. “I’ll explain later.”

Nancy reached across the table to hit him on the arm, an action which Karen pointedly pretended she didn’t see.

Karen kept her expression carefully neutral. “Well, now that I know you’re all getting along so well,” she began, only to be cut off by Jonathan choking on a piece of pudding and Steve and Nancy looking at her with alarm, “maybe we should make this a regular thing. A big dinner, I mean.”

Although they tried to play it off, the older kids were obviously still recovering from their embarrassment and couldn’t form a full sentence, stuttering out some syllables that sounded vaguely positive.

El, however, looked totally unfazed by everyone else's awkwardness. "Yes. With Eggos," she stated.

"Eggos!" Holly agreed, banging a chocolate covered fist on the table top.

Karen laughed. "All right, we can have Eggos next time. For dessert, though, not the main meal."

El nodded seriously, as if the matter was settled.

Steve smiled at Karen, although there was still a light pink blush covering his cheeks. "Great idea, Mrs. Wheeler. I think your roast is my new favorite."

Author's Note:

> I wanted to tag the Jonathan/Nancy/Steve but I also wanted it to be a bit of a surprise twist, so I'm really sorry!!!!